

# The Competency Based Approach to English Language Teaching

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## ABSTRACT

Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) is a functional approach to education that emphasizes life skills and evaluates mastery of those skills according to actual learner performance. CBLT addresses what the learners are expected to do rather than on what they are expected to learn about. It refers to an educational movement that advocates defining educational goals in terms of precise measurable descriptions of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours students should possess at the end of a course of study. This research article introduces an overview of competency-based language teaching where student's attitude and achievement comprise the important segments of appraisal.

## 1. Introduction

For many years, Indian students were taught about the language, but not taught how to use the language in neighborhood properly. Even in the present time, the performance of an education still makes disappointments; in the way of the students use English. Most of the students are capable in preserving their memories about the learning material given by the teachers, but they do not really understand how to use it. They still have difficulties in using English. The 21st century is the era of Knowledge Economy that creates competitive advantages, innovative capabilities and effective solutions. Because of the globalization era and the increase of industrial world, English speakers/workers are more demanded. But nowadays, the output from educational world is still having no competencies.

With the globalization of human activities (Crystal, D., 1997; Graddol, David, 1997) English becomes one of the most widely used language because of the political, military, scientific and technological and cultural power that the Anglo-American nations have had. In its globalizing process, it has transformed itself into varieties of English and in fact communication between non-native speakers of English is far greater in frequency, amount, and significance as well as the number of speakers today. This necessitates models of English and norms of its use being modified or altered in new circumstances. Having pointed out that language is not transmitted without being transformed according to circumstances while a disease spreads from one country to another and wherever it is, it is the same disease.

Kachru.Braj. B. (1985) divided the use of English into three categories: the Inner Circle, where English is spoken as a first (native) language (ENL); the Outer Circle, where it is spoken as a second or additional language (ESL); and the Expanding Circle, where it is used as a foreign language (EFL).

Indian English, Nigerian English, Singaporean English and others that are categorized in the Outer Circle are English which are in daily use in government, education and commerce as one of the official languages. They incline to produce their own

forms and norms different from those of the Anglo-American conventions in order to express the identity and serve the needs of the respective communities. In the course of time, the forms of English and norms of language use have changed to meet the needs of the communities, which is called "localization," "indigenization," "colonization," and the like.

The concept of EIL was first proposed by Smith, L. (1976) and, as the use of English for international communication increased, has developed as a research field and gained recognition in English language, English education, and related research fields. Jenkins, J. A. (2002) makes a distinction between EFL and EIL. EFL is to use English as a 'foreigner' to communicate with native speakers and the purpose of learning EFL is to gain the near-native competence. EIL, on the other hand, is to use English for international communication and the speakers are not 'foreign' speakers, but 'international' speakers of the language. Their models of English and norms of its use are not British English and culture nor American English and culture alone.

EIL consists of a variety of English—English by both native speakers and non-native speakers—in all three Circles. Its use for international communication can be described by bi-directional arrows that go across all the three Circles as in figure-1, whose thickness indicates the degree of frequency, volume, and functional significance of international communication.

EIL is a means of international interactions of professionals such as diplomats, business people, medical doctors, computer engineers, educators, musicians and artists, and academicians such as scientists, linguists, sociologists, psychologists and others. EIL's function is more information transactional and culturally neutral than communal involving local community identity, shared socio-cultural norms and experiences and so forth which are seen in the domestic use of the language in the Inner and Outer Circles. EIL is used, with specific purposes, for business negotiations, collaborative researches, academic discussions, and not for everyday life nor for socializing events.

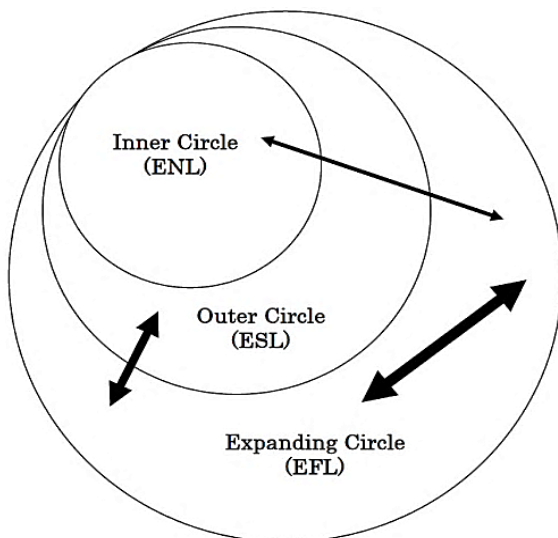


Figure-1 Distinction between EFL and EIL (Jenkins, J. A., 2002)

## 2. Nature of Competencies

It is important to define “competency” to understand competency-based learning. Competencies, or individual characteristics, were recognized as significant predictors of employee performance and success, equally as important as an individual’s academic aptitude and knowledge content as indicated by tests scores or results. A competency is the capacity of applying or using knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours (KSABs), and personal characteristics to successfully perform critical work tasks, specific functions or operate in a given role or position. Personal characteristics may be mental, intellectual, cognitive, social, emotional, attitudinal and physical or psychomotor attributes necessary to perform the job. Boyatzis, R. E. (1982) and Fogg, C. D. (1999) extend this definition to include both internal and external constraints, environments, and relationships related to the job or occupation. Concluding this, competencies are specific personal qualities that are “causally related to effective and superior performance”. Competency means a set of define behaviour or a cluster of related ability, knowledge, commitment, skills that enables a person to do a job effectively. It is in observable and measurable terms.

## 3. Types of Competencies

Competencies effectively fall in three groups:

- A. **Behavioural (or Life Skills) Competencies:** Life skills are problem solving behaviours used appropriately and responsibly in the management of personal affairs. They are a set of human skills acquired via teaching or direct experience that are used to handle problems and questions commonly encountered in daily human life. Examples are: Communication, Analytical Ability, Problem Solving, Initiative, etc.
- B. **Functional or Technical Competencies:** Functional Competencies relate to functions, processes, and roles within the organization and include the knowledge of, and skill in the exercise of, practices required for successful accomplishment of a specific job or

task. Examples are: Application Systems Development, Networking and Communication, Database Analysis and Design, etc.

- C. **Professional Competencies:** Professional competencies are competencies that allow for success in an organizational context. They are the accelerators of performance or – if lacking in sufficient strength and quality – are the reason people fail to excel in jobs. Examples are: Business Environment, Industry and Professional Standards, Negotiation, People Management, etc.

In any organisation there are some competencies that are more important than others, based on different criteria:

- D. **Core Competencies:** Core competencies are those competencies that any successful employee will need to rise through the organisation. These Competencies would generally relate in some way to the business of the organisation.
- E. **Key Competencies:** Key competencies contribute to valued outcomes of the organisation, defining the abilities of individuals to meet strategic demands, and are important not just for specialists but for all individuals.
- F. **Critical Competencies:** Critical competencies are competencies without which the organisation will be unable to achieve its goals and strategy.

## 4. Usage of Competencies in Various Applications

### In Job Descriptions:

Job descriptions explain the duties, working conditions, and other aspects of a job, including the competencies needed to perform the job's essential functions. Position-specific competencies are determined through the process of job analysis, and are documented in the Position Description (PD) form. These competencies form a basis for recruiting, hiring, training, developing, and managing the performance of employees.

### In Recruitment, Assessment, and Selection:

Describing desired competencies in recruitment announcements gives job seekers a clearer picture of what jobs entail. Competencies also provide the foundation for assessment and selection techniques, including exams, interviews, and reference checks.

### In Employee Performance Management:

Competencies allow supervisors to more fully describe to employees their performance expectations. Competency descriptions show employees what level of knowledge and skill mastery is required to successfully perform job duties, and what behavioural standards must be consistently demonstrated. Washington State's Performance and Development Plan includes competencies in both the expectations and evaluation sections.

### In Training and Development:

Done well, competencies allow supervisors to choose and prioritize training courses and other learning opportunities for employees. Training courses often describe the competencies students should be able to demonstrate by the end of the class. Likewise, most on-the-job and other developmental assignments are designed to build certain knowledge and skills. Knowing how class content and developmental activities build mastery helps supervisors to 'map' each position to a specific training and development plan that fosters growth in required competencies.

#### ***In Career and Workforce Planning:***

Competencies play a key role in workforce planning efforts. Knowing which competencies the future workforce must possess to achieve business goals and deliverables helps organizations plan and design:

- Organizational structure.
- Recruitment strategies.
- Training budgets and development plans.
- Job assignments and individual performance plans.

Employees can also use competencies to plan a career path. Knowing which competencies are critical for certain promotions allows employees to request training and development opportunities and seek out specific feedback and coaching.

#### **5. How Competence differ from Competency?**

Competence is an ability or capacity acquired through learning, exposures to the tasks and series of trainings. This ability is engaged to suffice the performance of a particular job. The commitment, satisfaction, and sincerity are giving all the best and big shots in the achievement and fulfilment of quality work. The skill wherein the little potential of an individual is given a chance to grow, mature, and immense so that adequate and appropriate steps will be exerted and performance would be in accordance with the set of rules. Management of a company should look into the gaps of each member of the company in order to guide and give proper trainings to the concerned. In short, competence is acquired by chance or by choice. Dedications and willingness to gain it depends on the individual's desire and priorities. Meaning competence needs third party to invoke and push through the potentials of an individual. For example, the company is looking for an employee to go up the organizational hierarchy, and the competences needed were itemized. If an employee has no particular competence the company needs, he cannot fill up the post. In that case, because of the push by outside force, he is willing or force to find ways in order to acquire the needed competence.

Competency is an in-born skills or talents of a person. Competency is a skill or knowledge given by God. It is within the inner self. The ability to be neat, clean, organized, decisive, pro-active, etc. which all are form an attitude. Also the ability to sing, dance, draw, communicate fluently with diplomatic approach....these are more than just acquired skills or talents. Competency is smart ideas. The common sense of a person has an automatic positive response to the unavoidable

circumstances. It can respond and solve problems immediately as the need arises. This skill was already there when a person was born. The thing is that some people ignore and misuse their God-given gifts that is why training is provided to redevelop, reborn and reenergize the sleeping skills. Sometimes, people try to develop more what they have. See for example those dancers still went to dancing classes to know more skills in dancing. To reinvent more techniques in diversifying their performances as they tried to focus in achieving and meeting the expectations, well-defined future action plans and their complacency. People having competency are very well-disciplined, well-respected and well-educated because of positive vibes they have.

In summary, to compare competence vs. competency is that: Competence is acquired by an individual from the outside force/factor while Competency is a God-given gift of skills, talents, and knowledge. But both are enhanced for better performance and quality output.

#### **6. Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT)**

Findley C. A. and L. A. Nathan (1980) define competency-based education as a philosophical system or model in an educational service where competency is the specification of a capability in designated areas of knowledge, assessed through student performance. The competencies acquired by an individual are those that are needed to function in a society.

Furthermore, on the adult education, Parker, J., and Taylor, P. (1980) state that competency based adult education is a performance-based process leading to demonstrated mastery of basic life skill necessary for the individual to function proficiently in societies.

There are three areas prepared for the students to implement competency-based education (Parker, J., & Taylor, P. 1980).They are:

- 1) Basic skills including all communication skills, mathematics, and physical fitness
- 2) The natural and physical world, humanities and fine arts, and social systems
- 3) Rigorous intensive experience in a selected area such as foreign languages for statistics.

In the language area, according to Grognet, A. G. and Crandall, J. (1982) a competency-based curriculum is a performance-based out-line of language tasks that lead to a demonstrated mastery of the language associated with specific skills that are necessary for individuals to function proficiently in the society in which they live'. Therefore, language needs are only the requirement of an individual or a group of people which emerges as a result of the use of the language in the social and work situations (Findley C. A. et al. 1980).

#### **7. Background of the Competency-Based Approach**

Chelli, S. (2010) stated that the "theoretical roots of the competency based approach lie in the behaviourist model from the 1950s'. Henny K. E. (2005) also agrees with Chelli, S. (2010) about the starting point of CBA. He considered the emergence of CBA as a reaction to the situation after the

Second World War. Where teaching English as a second or foreign language became an important matter, because of the role of English as international language for communication by the 1950, and the influence of the technological prosperity in reinforcing English. All these circumstances led to the need for practical English for people in many parts of the world rather than academic English language acquired in school (Richards, J. C. 2001).

Moreover, Richards, J. C. (2006) gave more explanation about the development of this approach. He considered CBA as an extension of communicative language teaching (CLT) which emerged in the 1970s, and which has great influence on language teaching around the world, especially approaches of language teaching that appeared today (Richards, J. C. 2006).

In the competency-based approach, learners study English within situations and contexts that are varied and relevant. In other words, the language is introduced and practiced in different situations that are similar to situations that could occur in real-life. The aim is that learners develop language and problem-solving abilities that they can use in new and challenging situations in college and out of college. Therefore, learners will see learning English as useful to their student life and future.

The CBA involves clearly described learner competencies. A competency is

- The ability to act in English using a range of skills and knowledge;
- The ability to use English in various situations that may be different from the situations in which the skills and knowledge were learned.

In the competency-based approach to teaching English, the competencies are linked to learners' needs in and out of classroom. They learn to speak, read, listen and write, and to re-use language in new situations. Teachers teach these skills in an integrated way, not separately, since that is how they are used outside the classroom. It is important that teachers help learners to practice English in varied contexts or situations if they are going to be able to remember and use what they have learned when they need it. It takes a lot of practice using English in different contexts for learners to be able to use English in real-life situations.

In the competency-based approach, emphasis is given to the productive, interpretive and interactive competencies:

- Productive competencies: speaking and writing
- Interpretive competencies: reading and listening
- Interactive competencies: speaking and writing

#### **Productive Competencies: speaking and writing**

Productive competency is the ability to produce coherent, appropriate and relevant messages in writing and speaking. It is also the ability to effectively express ideas and organize thoughts appropriately.

Productive competency is more often associated with writing because writing involves producing texts such as letters or essays. Productive speaking competency is also the production of texts; it differs from interactive speaking competency in that it does not involve interaction with other speakers. Giving a lecture or a presentation are examples of using one's productive speaking competency.

An example of productive skill is related to your study of vocabulary. It is easy to develop your receptive vocabulary. You can study words independently, memorizing the definitions, the word forms, the collocations and different uses of the words in context. Your receptive vocabulary can grow and when you see a list of words to study in your class, you might recognize some of them already. That's great but do you use these words correctly when you speak or write? If you do, they have moved into your productive vocabulary. This is the goal of your vocabulary study in the Languages Institute. You will see many new words in your reading texts or hear some in the listening exercises but the words you study are ones that you should try to use when you write or speak.

The productive skills are speaking and writing, because learners doing these need to produce language. They are also known as active skills. They can be compared with the receptive skills of listening and reading.

Example: Learners have already spent time practising receptive skills with a shape poem, by listening to it and reading it. They now move on to productive skills by group writing their own, based on the example.

#### **In the classroom:**

Certain activities, such as working with literature and project work, seek to integrate work on both receptive and productive skills.

#### **Interpretive Competencies: reading and listening**

Interpretive competency is the ability to understand written language through reading or spoken language through listening and to interpret it appropriately. Reading is the ability to understand and interpret written texts, listening is the ability to understand and interpret oral language. Reading and listening are thus addressed separately in the curriculum.

#### **Interactive Competencies: speaking and writing**

Interactive competency is the ability to use language orally to interact with others in order to create social relations, express needs, understand and address needs of others and to get things accomplished. Engaging in a discussion is an example of using one's interactive competency.

The linguistic competency (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) and strategic competency (strategies to help learn and use the language better) are viewed as 'supporting competencies'. These competencies are not the main objective of study, but are tools that learners use in order to better speak, listen, read and write in English.

The teacher's role in the competency-based approach is not simply to give information to learners, but to help students take an active role in their own learning.

## 8. Role of Learners and Teachers

**The Goal:** For learners to act in English using a range of skills and knowledge and to use English in various real-life communicative situations that may be different from the situations in which the skills and knowledge were learned. The focus is on learners being able to use English.

**The Role of Learners:** Learners are actively involved in all aspects of the lesson.

They regularly speak, read, write and listen within communicative situations in order to exchange ideas, information or messages; they figure out the rules and patterns of language; they plan for and use strategies to help them learn and communicate better.

**The Role of Teachers:** Teachers support learners in taking active roles in the classroom by providing them with experiences that meet their interests and needs.

Teachers are mainly responsible for facilitating what happens in the classroom: creating a comfortable, supportive and collaborative environment where learners can work actively, free from fear of making mistakes, and where they want to use English and have a 'real' purpose in using it; presenting language so that learners can figure out the rules and patterns and learn from their mistakes; providing communicative practice using English that supports learners in developing listening, reading, writing and speaking skills they need to exchange ideas and information to meet their needs and interests

### Materials

The materials the teacher chooses are mainly "sample texts and assessment tasks that provide examples of texts and assessment tasks that relate to the competency"(Richards, J. C. 2001). These materials are used to provide the students with "the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for effective performance of a real-world task or activity.

### The Types of Tasks

The types of tasks used in competency-based instruction are focused on the communicative purpose. They require learners to take an active role by

- thinking about the language;
- thinking about the situations;
- mobilizing the language;
- using strategies to aid communication

One of the most rewarding outcomes of a competency-based approach to teaching English is that the learners are likely to feel more interested and motivated. There are several reasons for this:

- They can see that the language and skills they are learning are relevant or useful to them.
- They are able to use English to express themselves and exchange ideas, which can make learners feel successful and motivated to learn more.
- The learners take an active role in their learning, which involves them more and contributes to higher motivation because it can hold their interest and build self-esteem.
- Competency-based teaching can also help teachers because the teacher's role is less directive (giving information and answers) and instructive and more facilitative: they design experiences to meet learners' interests and needs and in which learners participate actively to express themselves and understand the messages of others, and to figure out the language rules and patterns).
- In competency-based teaching, learners are active and teachers plan and organize tasks for learners so that learners are working in English. Teachers therefore have more time to observe what the learners understand and are able to do as speakers, listeners, readers and writers. They are then better able to design lessons that help the learners develop their competency.
- It is very tiring for teachers to be the center of attention all day. Some teachers speak so much that pains their throat. When teachers create a learner-centered, competency-based teaching classroom, learners take a more active role and teachers do not need to be the center of attention as much.
- It is possible for teachers to feel that they have more freedom, control and ability to be creative in a competency-based classroom because they can use methods of teaching that they and their students find interesting and useful as long as they focus on students developing the ability to use English.

Competency-based teaching focuses on helping learners to develop capabilities as speakers, listeners, readers and writers. It can be motivating and inspiring for teachers to see students using English to express themselves and complete tasks competently and confidently. By developing English competency, the learners are able to express themselves and communicate about their world to others, and gain access to the international community. In addition, as students take on an active role as English language learners, they take responsibility and develop problem-solving skills useful to their future as citizens of the world.

## 9. Characteristics of the Competency-Based Approach

The first apparent characteristic of the CBA is the focus on learning and pupils' activities (learners centered) rather than on the teacher's role. The CBA is socio constructivist approach

based on training students to construct their own knowledge to be able to use it in the daily life.

According to Auerbach E.R. (1986) cited in Richards, J. C. and Schmidt, R. (2002), the essential features that included in implementing the CBA syllabus are:

1. A focus on successful functioning in society: The goal is to enable students to become capable of coping with the demands of the world.
2. A focus on life skills: Students are taught those language skills required by the situations in which they will function.
3. Task – or – performance-centred orientation: The emphasis is on behaviour rather than knowledge. What counts is what students can do as a result of instruction.
4. Modularized Instruction: Language learning is broken down into manageable and immediately meaningful parts. Objectives are broken into narrowly focused sub-objectives so that both teachers and students can get a clear sense of progress.
5. Specified Outcomes: Students know exactly what outcomes are expected of them. Outcomes are specified in terms of behavioural objectives.
6. Continuous and on-going assessment: Program evaluation is based on test results and is considered objectively quantifiable.
7. Demonstrated mastery of performance objectives: Rather than the traditional paper-and-pencil test, assessment is based on the ability to demonstrate pre-specified behaviours.
8. Individualised, student-centred instruction: In content, level, and pace, objectives are defined in terms of individual needs; prior learning and achievement are taken into account in developing curricula. Instruction is not time based; students progress at their own rates and concentrate on just those areas in which they lack competence.

9. In addition to these characteristics, there are additional ones that are relevant to this approach:

- Regarding the competency-based approach, all the types of syllabuses, the grammatical, the lexical, the functional, the situational, and the task based syllabi, are important in teaching foreign language because their aim is to enhance the learner's role. So, they are important in developing the program of the CBA.

Richards [15] identified the nature of objectives according to the competency based approach. He said that "Objectives are broken into narrowly focused sub objectives, so that both teachers and students can get a clear sense of progress". In the CBA the objectives must be realized in the learner production as competencies, other way the teacher cannot move to other item till the learner achieves proficiency in learning the item was studied.

Each approach needs specific teaching materials in order to realize the aim of its foundation. Therefore, the authentic materials fit the CBA since as Phillips and Shettlesworth 1978; Clark 1989; Peack 1997 cited in Richards, J. C. (2001) claimed that this kind of materials motivate the learner because they provide him with information in interesting way, bring the real life situation and cultural information to the classroom, supply learner with real exposure to the target language, and meet the needs of the learner because they approach the real life to him (Richards, J. C. 2001).

## 10. Conclusion

In competency-based approach, it requisite to decide whether competencies are the starting and ending point of curriculum development. Also to decide whether competencies as tools that enables student to act for change in their lives. Teachers have to be very cautious in implementing competency-base English language teaching in order to really answer the students and industry's needs, not only the short-term needs but also the long-term needs. If, however, students and teachers try to adopt a competency-based approach without making the necessary changes in their own behaviour, the results are likely to be unsuccessful. On the other hand, if both embrace their new roles, they are likely to find learning becomes more effective and useful.

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